

**Remembrance Sunday****Real Sacrifice**

*Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44*

There are all kinds of sacrifices in the world. Sacrifices parents make for their children in order that they might get on in life. Sacrifices that couples make when one partner gets promotion at work, and the other has to step up with domestic duties. Sacrifices that individuals make in communities for the better good, denying themselves something, or deciding to back down from a confrontation to maintain the peace.

On Remembrance Sunday the sacrifices we remember are carved in stone and written on paper: the names of men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifices in two World Wars, and as we know in so many other conflicts across the world and throughout history. Palestine at the time of the British mandate. Suez. Korea. The Falklands. The Balkans. Afghanistan. Iraq. Do not forget the sacrifices being made today in Ukraine, and in Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, South Yemen and Iran. Real hot wars today, where men, women and children, combatants and innocent civilians, are paying with their lives a sacrificial price. But to what end?

We also forget the civil war our own country engaged in, in the 1970s and 1980s – the long, festering wound that was The Troubles in Northern Ireland. A war where, abusing the name of religion, people died cruel deaths on the streets of Ulster and mainland Britain.

Sacrifice in times of global war is enormous, but equally difficult are those times of sacrifice that drip heavily away at the heart of humanity when innocents are caught in the crossfire of man's inhumanity to man.

The question always to be asked in those times is, is this sacrifice justified? Is the justified end of peace always to be paid for with the sacrifice of innocents? In current conflicts in Gaza, in southern Israel, in Lebanon, and in Ukraine and Russia, does the right to have national security and freedom from attack justify the actions of the Israeli state against the people of Gaza, for example. Is there any proportionality in sacrifice? I can't answer that for you, but it is a question with which we all need to wrestle. What price peace, freedom, liberty?

In our Bible readings, first we read of Ruth, a non-Jew, who is widowed, and decides to travel back to ancient Israel with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. Both women had lost everything, but Ruth also lost her nationality, her homeland, sacrificing it to travel with the older woman to a foreign land where she would always be a stranger. She sacrificed everything because she cared, and knew that her sacrifice in accompanying the older woman would make a real difference. A real sacrifice that cost her.

We often make sacrifices, sometimes huge sacrifices, to help the people we love. What sacrifices have you made for the people you love? And what sacrifices have people made for you, because they love you? Real sacrifices.

In our New Testament reading we find Jesus in Jerusalem, observing in the Temple. He's not at all impressed by those who are ostentatiously pious. What had it cost them to be like that? What real sacrifices had they made for their faith? Their show is shallow. Their show was likely not to be all that sacrificial, as far as we can tell.

Then the poor widow came into view. We don't know why she chose to give all that she had, proportionately more than the wealthy people were giving. But she gave. Her gift to God. It might help poor relief in the city. It might feed people in greater need than she was herself. It might make a difference in some sad life somewhere. The poor widow made a sacrifice, a real sacrifice

to help others. Not counting the cost but giving with an astonishing generosity and selflessness. Do you know people who have made that kind of sacrifice; who have gone without in order to help others? Have you at some point in your life ever felt moved to make this kind of sacrifice, denying yourself so that others might be helped? Real sacrifice.

What would our community and church look like if more people made real sacrifices, of time, talent and money? What would our country look like? Or the wider world?

The word sacrifice has Latin roots which combine 'sacred' and 'to make'. It is essentially something of value offered as an act of devotion or worship to God.

At times it seems that sacrifice is best when someone else is doing it. We marvel at figures such as Mother Teresa; the families who find in their hearts the strength to forgive people who have done them wrong, subjected them to violence; or people working in the tougher areas of our city for little reward; or aid workers going out to Gaza, Bosnia, Afghanistan at great personal risk to bring some kind of help. We lift them high on the pedestal of sacrifice with the poor widow, keeping them distinct and distant from our daily lives. We may look at *their* giving and the inadequacy of *ours*, but rarely does anything change.

The poor widow was not only giving her money, which was significant. She was offering up her whole self, Jesus says. It is an act of total faith. Sacrifice, to make sacred. Giving all she had, in order that somehow others might be helped, and saved, and God be glorified.

This little snapshot in the life of Jesus is the last scene in Jesus' public ministry. The poor widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about. He is on the way to giving the whole of His life, to help, save broken, incomplete, desperate humanity. Like the widow Jesus puts in everything He has. Our broken, fractious, greedy, cold-hearted world – some of it anyway – needs all of Jesus, all of

the sacrifice, to begin to make it better. Real sacrifices are still being made by real people to help humanity.

On the last day of July, 1941 the Auschwitz sirens announced the escape of a prisoner. As a reprisal, ten of his fellow prisoners would die – a long, slow starvation, buried alive in a specially constructed bunker. All day, tortured by sun, hunger and fear, the men waited as the German commandant and his Gestapo assistant walked between the ranks to select, quite arbitrarily, the chosen ten.

As the commandant pointed to one man, Francis Gajowniczek, he cried out in despair, 'My poor wife and children.' At that moment the unimpressive figure of a man with sunken eyes and round glasses in wire frames stepped out of line and took off his cap. He said, "I am a Catholic priest; I want to die for that man. I am old, he has a wife and children...I have no one." Said Father Maximilian Kolbe. His offer was accepted.

That night nine men and one priest went to the starvation bunker. Normally a kind of madness would descend on them but not this time. While they had strength, lying naked on the floor, the men prayed and sang hymns. After two weeks three of the men and Father Maximilian were still alive. The bunker was required for others, so on 14<sup>th</sup> August the remaining four were disposed of. The Polish priest was finally given a lethal injection of phenol and died at the age of forty-seven.<sup>i</sup> In 1982 in St Peter's Square Rome, Father Maximilian's sacrifice was put in perspective. Present in the crowd of 150,000 was Francis Gajowniczek, his wife, his children, and his children's children – for many had been saved by the sacrifice made by that one man. Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe as a saint; and a statue of Kolbe can be found above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey.

Sacrifice, real sacrifice, comes in many forms. In times of war and peace. On the national and international stage, and at a domestic level. Through acts of enormous generosity and charity, and through little offerings. Through the gifting of time and talents and money, any one of which, given wholeheartedly, can make all the difference in the world.

It's not exclusive to Christianity, it is found in the lives of all faith communities, and amongst those with no faith. But for Christians, in the whole-hearted giving of the poor widow, giving all she had because she wanted to do this, and in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World Who gave His life as an encouragement to hope, even in dark days, we have examples of how we should give, and why we should give, and not to hold back from making real sacrifices to help and to hallow and to heal the world where we live.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> *Nicky Gumbel, Questions of Life, pps 19-20*